

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
July 23, 2003

Contact: Cory Fong
(701) 328-3660

ELECTION REFORM PLAN GATHERS VALUABLE PUBLIC INPUT

Bismarck, ND – According to officials from the Secretary of State's office, valuable input and comments were gathered during Monday's public hearing concerning North Dakota's proposed plan to implement federal election reform, known as the Help America Vote Act of 2002 (HAVA). Participants attending the hearing emphasized the importance of improving access to voting for persons with disabilities and raised concerns about the plan's proposal to reduce the number of precincts in the state.

Participants representing the disabilities community in North Dakota were encouraged by the plan's proposed goal to upgrade each polling location in the state with voting devices equipped to allow disabled persons to vote without requiring assistance from others. The Secretary of State's office and county officials were urged to involve the disabilities community when determining the state's accessibility needs and when purchasing new and improved voting devices.

North Dakota's proposed plan, which has been available for public comment since June 25, calls for a survey to evaluate the accessibility needs of the state's more than 600 existing voting locations. James Moench of Bismarck, representing a consortium of disability organizations, recommended that persons with disabilities should be consulted during the development of the survey.

The state is proposing to pay for the cost of conducting a survey from a federal grant to be awarded by the Health and Human Services (HHS) Agency. According to an official from the Secretary of State's office, data will be gathered and evaluated concerning the accessibility of existing voting locations whether or not the state is awarded the grant from HHS to conduct a formal survey.

The plan proposes that each voting location in the state will be equipped by January 2006 with a common voting system to promote consistency in voting, ease election official training, facilitate better and more cohesive voter education, and to increase the state's buying power. The voting system installed in each polling location will be required to accommodate diverse disabilities and allow persons with disabilities to vote without requiring assistance. Allan Peterson of Fargo, an advocate for the visually impaired, and Moench recommended that persons with diverse disabilities have an opportunity to experiment with and vote on the new voting equipment prior to any decisions being made concerning which voting devices will be selected for use throughout the state.

An Official from the Secretary of State's office indicated that there will be an opportunity for state and county officials to use and test voting systems during an election equipment tradeshow scheduled in early October and prior to a voting system being selected for the state. Other planning members present at the hearing agreed that it makes good sense to invite

representation from the disabilities community to the trade-show to gauge their response to the new equipment.

Attendees also raised concerns about a formula in the proposed plan to reduce the number of precincts in the state from the current number of 666 precincts to approximately 525, a reduction of approximately twenty percent. The proposed formula, which is subject to revision prior to the plan being finalized, is primarily aimed at reducing the number of precincts that will be required to be updated with the new voting system in hopes of reducing implementation costs and spreading the federal funding further.

Joe Farrell of Bismarck expressed concern that reducing precincts, whatever the aim or goal, ultimately increases the likelihood that some people will choose not to vote, especially older citizens.

"Weather, distance and time are factors, and reducing the number of precincts in the state is going to have an adverse effect on voting. One of the big things we need to do is get more people voting."

Members of the state planning and steering committees present also indicated that the proposed reductions in precincts are intended to offer counties an incentive for making common-sense reductions that better reflect today's population concentrations and voting trends.

Kevin Glatt, Burleigh County Auditor and member of the State HAVA Planning Committee, supports the incentive for counties to attempt to reduce precincts and polling locations.

"We need to look at this as an opportunity to do better, to find better sites for polling locations in North Dakota. For us (Burleigh County), the plan says we need to go from 38 to 35 (precincts)," said Glatt. "If we can do that without trouble, we should do it."

Mike Montplaisir, Cass County Auditor and chairman of the State HAVA Planning Committee, emphasized that while precincts may be reduced as a result of the plan, the access to voting ultimately will increase due to the improvements that will be made to accessibility for persons with disabilities and the advances in voting technology that ensure voters are given a second chance to vote by correcting errors on their ballots.

"Today, people have more opportunities to vote," said Montplaisir. "They have no-excuse absentee voting and now early voting, both of which are intended to make voting easier and increase participation."

Monday's public hearing, conducted by Secretary of State Al Jaeger's office and hosted by the North Dakota Association of Counties in Bismarck, was broadcast live via the state's Interactive Video Network (IVN) in satellite locations in Fargo, Grand Forks, and Fargo. While attendance at Monday's hearing was less than expected, organizers were encouraged by the level and quality of participation.

"We are pleased that we included a public hearing as a part of our state planning process," said Jaeger. "The few who attended and provided feed-back are important to our efforts and have provided us with good suggestions for improving the plan. Their ideas will be thoughtfully considered. Each of the participants contributed toward a better election process in North Dakota by their presence and participation at the hearing."

"It is very refreshing to see someone step-up to the plate," said Glatt, "The leadership of the various County Auditors around the state who helped draft this plan, the Secretary of State's office, the North Dakota Association of Counties, and the voting citizens who have contributed throughout the process, have really led this effort."

At the conclusion of the public comment period ending on July 25, the state planning committee will reconvene on July 31 to make final changes before the plan is finalized by the Secretary of State's office and submitted to the Federal Election Assistance Commission and published in the Federal Register for 45 days.

The proposed plan is available for review on the Secretary of State's HAVA web site at www.discovernd.com/hava and may also be accessed at the Secretary of State's office, county and city auditors' offices, and public libraries. A copy of the proposed plan may be requested by e-mail, telephone, or by writing the Secretary of State's office. Copies of the plan were mailed to interested parties and voter groups, to include county and city election officials, the state's political parties, and interest groups represented on the state planning committee.

Comments on the proposed plan may be submitted online using the Secretary of State's HAVA web site at www.discovernd.com/hava or in writing to the Secretary of State's office.

###